

Hoyer preaches preparation for future BRAC

by JEFF NEWMAN, Staff writer, SoMdNews.com

A self-described salesman, U.S. Rep. Steny H. Hoyer enlisted dozens of Charles County business leaders and military advocates Monday in his effort to promote Naval Support Facility Indian Head in preparation for any future rounds of base realignment and closure.

“If I’m the director of sales, I’m appointing you all sales reps,” the congressman said at the town’s Village Green Pavilion, where the Indian Head Defense Alliance and Charles County Chamber of Commerce had scheduled a “roll up our sleeves” meeting to discuss ways of protecting the base from potential attrition or closure.

U.S. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced in January the possibility of a BRAC round in the 2013 federal budget as part of a plan to trim defense spending by \$487 billion over the next decade, sparking anxiety among local residents worried that the Indian Head base could be affected.

Though he agreed with recent statements from U.S. Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin (D-Md.) that it was “unlikely” Congress would agree to a BRAC this year, Hoyer (D-Md., 5th) acknowledged that future rounds are still a “possibility” and noted the importance of being prepared.

“We need to plan on BRAC being a reality,” Hoyer said. “Whether a BRAC comes sooner or later is less relevant than the question, ‘Are we ready for a BRAC?’

“We must continue to sell our base,” he added, pointing to a recent four-hour visit paid to the base by Navy Secretary Ray Mubus.

Hoyer also emphasized the looming possibility of a \$1.2 trillion sequestration Congress agreed to last year, “not as good policy [but] as such a bad policy” that it would encourage compromise on sweeping budget cuts.

If no agreement is reached, the automatic cuts — half of which would be in defense spending — would occur over a 10-year period beginning in 2013.

At no time since the mid-1970s “has the Department of Defense faced challenges like it faces now,” said J. Michael Hayes, a retired U.S. Marine Corps brigadier general and current director of the state Office of Military and Federal Affairs. “It’s going to be a tough climb and everyone’s going to have to be focused because there’s great challenges ahead.”

Former U.S. secretary of veterans affairs Anthony J. Principi, a member of the 2005 BRAC Commission, added, “It’s pretty evident to me that we definitely need a BRAC.”

Noting that Panetta “desperately wants two BRACs,” Principi stated his belief that there will “likely” be BRAC rounds in 2013 and 2015.

“I cannot stress enough the importance of being prepared by taking actions now to increase your military value,” he said.

Principi encouraged locals to sell the base’s status as the military’s Center of Excellence for Energetics and encourage the relocation and consolidation of other weapons programs and common missions to Indian Head.

Past alliance president John Bloom credited Hoyer’s “access and influence” with helping save the base in the past, but said that “Indian Head itself” was the most crucial component to getting it off both the 1995 and 2005 lists.

“Indian Head has military value,” Bloom said. “No matter how many great people in Congress you have to help you, no matter how many great people in the community you have to help you, you can’t make chicken salad with chicken feathers. You’ve got to have some substance.”

Principi noted that federal law allows the defense department to scale back on personnel and realign resources outside of the official BRAC process, cuts that he said resemble smaller, “below-the-radar BRACs.”

“There’s a BRAC going on right now and no one should be put to sleep on the fact that there is not a formal BRAC going on right now,” Hoyer said.

“Every day is a BRAC day,” alliance President Dennis Chappell added.

Since 1985, 70 percent of the explosives that have been transitioned to U.S. military weapons have been developed at Indian Head, Chappell said.

In addition to 2005, the base also made the BRAC commission’s preliminary list for closure in the 1993 and 1995 rounds. Principi pointed out that historically, only 14 percent of the bases that make it onto the preliminary list ever make it off.

“Both times, most people don’t realize how close Indian Head was to being closed,” said Del. John L. Bohanan Jr. (D-St. Mary’s), a senior Hoyer adviser. “If you were on the list, you had a lot of work to do to get off.”

The Indian Head base was not threatened during the initial BRAC in 1988, but the commission did consider closing the Patuxent River Naval Air Station, Bohanan said.

“Just like that, Pax River was almost gone,” he said. “Think about St. Mary’s County, where it’s 80 percent of the economy.”

In future rounds of BRAC, Bohanan said he “could not stress enough the importance of the business community” in protecting Southern Maryland’s military installations.

“It’s something that takes a strong partnership inside the gate and outside the gate,” he said.

The base has a \$140 million payroll of nearly 2,400 civilian employees, 560 military and more than 590 contractors, according to a slideshow presentation from U.S. Navy Capt. Peter R. Nette, commanding officer of Naval Support Activity South Potomac, which provides administration for the Indian Head and Dahlgren, Va., bases.

Of those employees, two-thirds live in Charles County and 893 have college degrees, including 55 doctorates, the second-highest percentage among the 10 Naval Surface Warfare Center locations, according to another slideshow presented by base Technical Director Dennis McLaughlin.

“Ensure the intellectual capital, the human capital that has been built here stays here,” Principi said.

Chamber President Carlos Montague ended the meeting by framing the effort to protect the base another way.

He asked the crowd of “newly appointed sales reps” how much effort they thought would be put into convincing a company with a \$1 billion annual budget and 3,500 employees to relocate in Charles County.

Luckily, Montague noted, the county has no need to attract such a business.

“We already have one,” he said.